The Great Gatsby: An American Nightmare

Byung-Woo Yoon

I

In 1945 Lionel Trilling defined *The Great Gatsby*, relating it with the "American dream," as a kind of historical novel about America itself. "For Gatsby," he said, "divided between power and dream, comes inevitably to stand for America itself. Ours is the only nation that prides itself upon a dream and gives its name to one, 'the American dream.'" According to Trilling, Scott Fitzgerald's clear intention in *Gatsby* is "that our mind should turn to the thought of the nation that has sprung from its 'Platonic conception' of itself."[1] Since Trilling, numerous critics have contributed to this line of historical approach to *Gatsby*. Connecting Gatsby's individual tragedy to the tragedy of American civilization, Edwin Fussell claimed in 1952 that the subject of *Gatsby* is "the whole of American civilization as it culminated in his own time."[2] "The theme of *Gatsby*," Marius Bewley stated in 1954, "is the withering of the American dream."[3] Much of the *Gatsby* criticism centers on these interpretations.[4]

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1) Mizener, ed. 17.
2) *Ibid.* 49
3) *Ibid.* 125

There seems to be a consensus also on the reason for and the inevitability of the failure of the "American dream": it is a corrupt materialism fatally inherent in the "American dream."[5] Yet there have to be further studies, I believe, on why the "American dream" could not help taking the direction of materialism. Trilling suggested a very plausible reason in the same article right after the quotation above:

> To the world it is anomalous in America, just as in the novel it is anomalous in Gatsby, that so much raw power should be haunted by envisioned romance. Yet in that anomaly lies, for good or bad, much of the truth of our national life, as, at the present moment, we think about it.

The anomaly of the life in America in its beginning as a nation was the possibility of new life for the humanity. Trilling, however, did not go further, nor has the *Gatsby* criticism gone so far.

I will try to go beyond Trillingian criticism with the aid of D. H. Lawrence's interpretation of America's history through classic American literature.[6] In respect of the basic reasons for the inevitability of the failure of the "American dream," I will make a few assumptions: first, that there was no model for the new, ideal life in a new world is the reason for the "American dream"'s failure,

4) For example, see the section under the heading History-Myth-Meaning" in Donaldson ed.

5) Kermit W. Moyer shows this most clearly and persuasively. See Donaldson ed. 215-228.

6) D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923; New York: Viking, 1964).

as Trilling insisted; second, it was Benjamin Franklin who contrived a model American; third, Franklin's model, a very narrow one based on his intellectualization of humanity with a rigid Christian consciousness of elitism, urged the American mind to set values upon the material, the tangible reality; last, Gatsby's tragedy is an adjudication of bankruptcy of the Franklinesque dream of a new life in a new world which turned into a nightmare.

II

Before discussing Gatsby's dream, we should be reminded of one simple, manifest fact: *Gatsby* is Nick Carraway's long flashback. A lot of critics have reminded us of that, but it is quite strange that few critics have noted Nick's social class and morality. When we discuss the "American dream," it is important to know whose viewpoint it is discussed from, for the answer will be depending on one's social position. We are informed from the first of this fiction that Nick belongs to the middle class, the backbone class of America. His family is "something of a clan" (*Gatsby* 7)[7] in a middle-western city. His moral sensibility also represents that of the middle class. His moral superiority is based on his father's advice that "a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth" (*Gatsby* 6) and he accepts it as a somewhat snobbish axiom, which fits him as a young educated man. His valuing of it and the relation with his father, however, show him

7) F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby: the Authorized Text*, Notes and Preface by Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Scribner, 1995).

one who cherishes middle class family values. After he decides to go to the East and learn the bond business, he waits for the assent of all his aunts and uncles. Compared with Tom, the very rich, and Gatsby, the very poor (at the start), who are never shown to have good relations with their family, Nick's middle class family values look very sound and commonsensical. "When I came back from the East last autumn," he says, "I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever"(6). To Nick's morality, Gatsby is a real humbug who represents everything for which he has an unaffected scorn.

Unlike common middle class people, however, Nick can recognize Gatsby's gift:

> If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away ... It was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again. (6)

And he has the courage to stand by Gatsby whom everybody scorns and uses. After Gatsby's death Nick finds himself alone with Gatsby against the whole world. Therefore, Nick's middle-class perspective, along with his merit to recognize Gatsby's gift, supposedly gives us a balanced view of Gatsby's dream. Nick's judgment about it will be discussed at the conclusion of this essay.

Gatsby is from the lowest class of the middle-west, North Dakota.

He was poor, like the immigrants from Southeast Europe or anywhere over the world. Poverty makes him to aspire a success, the promises of life, though he does not know exactly what success he wants. His "gift for hope" is so dire and makes him romp that his imagination takes refuge to unreality until he meets Daisy.

> But his heart was in a constant, turbulent riot. The most grotesque and fantastic conceits haunted him in his bed at night. A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain while the clock ticked on the wash-stand and the moon soaked with wet light his tangled clothes upon the floor. Each night he added to the pattern of his fancies until drowsiness closed down upon some vivid scene with an oblivious embrace. For a while these reveries provided an outlet for his imagination; they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing. (105)

Meeting Daisy, Gatsby gets a more concrete vision of what he wants. It is not a mere fortune, material success. Some material abundance is a requirement of a rich life, but not a sufficient condition. Gatsby wants something he glanced beyond Daisy's wealth. It is not, however, just transcendental. It is, rather, a heightened combination of the material and the transcendental.[8] For Gatsby knows well that Daisy's attraction comes out of her wealth.

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8) Almost all the criticism on the Gatsby's dream in relation to the American dream" sets a dichotomy between the material and the transcendental, and view Gatsby's dream definitely as the latter. It sees Gatsby as an avatar of dream that bloomed out of the clay-like reality. This view is definitely untrue. Gatsby is a man who cannot think of dream unrelated with material.

> There was a ripe mystery about it, a hint of bedrooms upstairs more beautiful and cool than other bedroom, of gay and radiant activities taking place through its corridors and of romances that were not musty and laid away already in lavender but fresh and breathing and redolent of this ear's shining motor cars and of dances whose flowers were scarcely withered. (155-56)

> Gatsby was overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves, of the freshness of many clothes and of Daisy, gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor. (157)

To Gatsby, material wealth does not contradict the transcendental urge. Neither did it the Dutch sailors' when they first saw Long Island, "a fresh, green breast of the new world"(189). Gatsby incarnates his transcendental dream into Daisy by kissing her.

> Out of the corner of his eye Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalk really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees – he could climb to it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder.
> His heart beat faster and faster as Daisy's white face came up to his own. He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God. So he waited, listening for a moment longer to the tuning fork that had been struck upon a star. Then he kissed her. At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete. (117)

At this moment, at least, Gatsby's choosing of Daisy is not a corruption of his dream. It is not just an unreal fantasy, nor a sour materialism. It is a flower of life that fully blossomed.

Then why does it fail? Gatsby's new vision still lacks reality, though it is not just a fantasy. Life in a society is a reality and it requires tangible customs and manners about the form of life. Gatsby does not know that, because no one has taught him, nor could he find a model case, except the out-dated Benjamin Franklinesque model. The New World itself did not provide a model for the heightened life. It just provided a vast, anomalous possibility. People had to create their own model. And it was Franklin who first succeeded in making a model American. "He set up the first dummy American," D. H. Lawrence points out.[9] His historical mission was to make a true American breaking away from Europe. To make a new form of life, a new style of living, requires at least several centuries. Wanting independence from Europe, Franklin decided to make a model out of a "Platonic conception" and he succeeded. But it was mechanical, being the result of intellectualization. His list of virtues put the Americans into a mold, instead of liberating them. And ironically but understandably, his list of virtues condoned the materialistic desire in the name of morality.

The bad thing is that Franklin's model was so forceful that even Gatsby in the twentieth century tries to follow it. However, it faded because of the materialism which it encouraged. So Gatsby's

9) Lawrence 9.

pursuit of his dream is in many ways mock-Franklinesque. Gatsby's schedule and resolves in his teens shows this. Surely transcribed from Franklin's autobiography, this list "is conspicuously devoid of moral questions." Instead, Gatsby "focuses on the enhancement of self-image through 'Dumbbell exercise and wall-scaling.'"(181).[10] Ben Franklin's intention to cultivate a virtuous inner character is substituted by a mere external presentation.

In a satirical representation of the ideal of self-help, there is another image: Horatio Alger's Dick. Gatsby's meeting with Dan Cody, who is his mentor, undermines his image of self-made man, for he is not an honest, diligent boy, nor was Dan Cody a virtuous gentleman.[11] The name Dan Cody contains historical allusions. It is a composite name of Daniel Boone, one of the first pioneers, and William (Buffalo Bill) Cody, the last of the pioneers. Hence it encompasses "the beginning and end of the American frontier."[12] Gatsby is left with his spiritual legacy. So his dream is in the line of pioneering, the whole history of America.

If Dan Cody is Gatsby's father figure, Meyer Wolfsheim is Merlin in Gatsby's quest for a grail. For Nick endows Gatsby with the image of a knight who is in pursuit of a grail.

> ... had committed himself to the following of a grail. He knew that Daisy was extraordinary but he didn't realize just how extraordinary a "nice" girl could be. She vanished into her rich house, into her rich, full life, leaving Gatsby – nothing. (156)

10) Decker 63.

11) For an account of Alger's influence on Fitzgerald, see Scharnhorst.

12) Lehan 42.

This image fits Gatsby when he stands vigil the night of the car accident in the garden of Daisy's house lest Tom should hurt her. But he was made by Wolfsheim.

> "Did you start him in business?" I inquired.
> "Start him! I made him."
> "Oh."
> "I made him up out of nothing ... " (179)

The parody in this is clearly against the Franklin-Alger myth of self-made man. When we remind ourselves of the anti-Semitism of the 1920s and Franklin's white elitism, the scope of the parody broadens. The description of Wolfsheim is a commonplace pejorative image of the Jews. We are always reminded of his peculiar nose and its comic movement. He eats ferociously and shows an extreme sentimentalism while he will do some hidden cruel things without blinking his eyes. These pejorative images are based on the anti-Semitism which was promoted by Nordicism (a kind of pseudo-scientific nativism). Tom, at Nick's first visit to his dinner table, explains a little about the idea but it contains the idea's essence; "that the American nation was founded and developed by the Nordic race" and "Races can not be cross-bred without mongrelization."[13] This anti-immigration idea heightened people's suspicions about the relation between foreigners and crime, and the Jews were the easiest victims. While suggesting a model American as a new model of humanity for a new world, Franklin regarded the

13) Decker 53.

aboriginal Indians as the savages that should be extirpated. "The Great Spirit who made all things," Franklin said, "made everything for some use, and whatever use he designed anything for, that use it should always be put to. Now, when he made rum, he said 'LET THIS BE FOR INDIANS TO GET DRUNK WITH.' And it must be so. And indeed if it be the design of Providence to extirpate these savages in order to make room for the cultivators of the earth, it seems not improbable that rum may be the appointed means."[14] This preposterous white elitism revives in the narrow nativism of Nordicism in the 1920s. The fact that Gatsby is linked to Wolfsheim in the pursuit of his dream is a strong attack on the Franklin-Alger myth of self-made man and its white elitism, and keeps Gatsby's dream from being a 'pure' Franklinesque "American dream."

If we keep in mind Franklin's remark about rum, Gatsby's making fortunes by bootlegging is another parody of Franklin's model American. Whereas Franklin's rum users were the Indians, Gatsby's whiskey users are the top class of the society, including Tom, which Gatsby aspires to belong to in some sense, and the celebrities who attend his parties. And who feel they are on the verge of extirpation are such people as Tom. Gatsby's whiskey makes people, even Nick, get drunken, but he remains sober to the end. Ironically enough, people who get drunken are the realists, and Gatsby keeps his 'transcendental' dream. Perhaps he has been drunk all the time with his dream, and his life is over when he awakes from the dream.

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14) Requoted from Callahan 7.

That *Gatsby*'s time setting is the Prohibition era is also interesting in regard to Franklin. The Prohibition Law may be a result of an exceptional idealism which intended to inculcate in the national morality by one law in the age of spiritual waste land. This kind of idealism corresponds exactly to Franklin's intellectualism which made out a model American. It lacks deep contemplation on human nature and behavior. Therefore, it is understandable that gangsters proliferated by bootlegging during the Prohibition era. The possibilities of quick money through bootlegging damages severely the Franklinesqe myth that whoever works with honesty and diligence can succeed. The Prohibition, which is in the line of the Franklinesque ideal, ironically provides the device to destroy it. Bootlegging made Gatsby a fortune but, at the end, destroyed him, for he could not go beyond the Franklinesque model of the "American dream."

Another source of Gatsby's money is bond. The phone call from Chicago to Gatsby after his death affirms the connection between Gatsby and bond.

> "Young Parke's in trouble," he said rapidly. "They picked him up when he handed the bonds over the counter. They got a circular from New York giving'em the numbers just five minutes before. What d'you know about that, hey?" (174)

This shows that the investments in bond in the twenties were more like the speculations which also offered the chances of quick money. Hence even Nick who belongs to the well-to-do middle class, goes to New York to learn the bond business. Everybody around

him was already in the bond business (7). The middle class, which is the backbone of American morality, and the traditional advocate of the ideal of the self-made man, is now throwing the ideal away for quick money. One thing that still separates Nick from Gatsby is the decency (not necessarily conscience) Nick has been proud of. When offered Gatsby's reward for the arranging of his reunion with Daisy, Nick declines. He knows he would accept it under different circumstances, though the offer is surely not a morally clean one, and it might be one of the crises of his life (88). In that case, Nick would become like a Gatsby in a minor scale. However, his decency or, rather, his conventionality saves him. And this affirms some valuable points about middle class morality.

Gatsby's money changes the nature of his dream. It makes him a more superficial person and, to some degree, a fetish worshiper. Gatsby's reason for yearning to regain Daisy is to regain the moment of the happy union of the realistic, materialistic and the transcendental. Therefore, wealth has no meaning to him unless it offers the base for the abundant life beyond the materialistic itself. Here, again, Gatsby does not know how to use his wealth to reach a form of the ideal life. No one has taught him about that, nor can. He wastes, therefore, his wealth in an enormous scale only in the hope of Daisy's coming to his party. Nick is moved by this romantic ardor, but this squandering can never be sound and never promise new life. Rather, he wants to be recognized by his owning. His car is showy enough to be a circus car, and the bookshelves in his study are stacked with very valuable books unread. Introducing Daisy to his house, he estimates his properties with her eyes as if his value

depends on them. By doing this, Gatsby makes his properties into fetish. The shirts scene, one of the most strange and impressive scenes in *Gatsby*, shows this.

> He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them one by one before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine-flannel which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray. While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher – shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple green and lavender and faint orange with monograms of Indian blue. Suddenly with a strained sound Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily.
> "They're such beautiful shirts," she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. "It makes me sad because I've never seen such – such beautiful shirts before." (97-98)

Daisy cries because she detects Gatsby's intense feelings condensed in the shirts. However, Gatsby's intense feelings are his need to be recognized by his owning, which is fetishism. In this respect, he falls short of self-made man, for he lacks self-confidence.

Contrary to his fetishism, however, five years' parting from Daisy makes Gatsty's dream more idealized and romanticized. Hence his dream begins to crack up into two parts: fetishism and transcendentalism. That is a retreat. First, Gatsby wants Daisy to amalgamate the crack up in his dream. However, she can't. For she is only a woman who needs love.[15] Thus, when Gatsby tells her

15) For an account of Daisy's characterization, see Fryer 153-166. Fryer convincingly argues that Daisy has been dealt only from the male characters' point of view. Beneath Daisy's mask of decadent carelessness, she argues, there is a real Daisy who longs for love.

about the green light, she thinks it as a tender moment and ventures to put her hand to his.

"You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock."

Daisy put her arm through his abruptly but he seemed absorbed in what he had just said. Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one. (98)

However, to Nick's eyes, Gatsby feels that his ideal of Daisy vanishes; because she is now beside him, the green light which has represented her vanished. This is not her fault but a result of Gatsby's idealization of her.

> There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams – not through her own fault but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, checking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart. (101)

Therefore, their development of emotion after their reunion is

difficult to imagine. Fitzgerald avoids this difficulty tactfully by excusing Nick from the two of them for his own affair with Jordan. Actually, Fitzgerald observed this as his big fault. He wrote to Edmund Wilson:

> The worst fault in it, I think is a BIG FAULT: I gave no account (and had no feeling about or knowledge of) the emotional relations between Gatsby and Daisy from the time of their reunion to the catastrophe.[16]

In the context of the discussion above, however, the description of it would be very unnatural and awkward. Hence Fizgerald's instinct as a writer not to describe it was right.

After the reunion, Gatsby thinks Daisy does not understand his dream while she used to be able to before. "And she doesn't understand," he said despairingly. "She used to be able to understand. We'd sit for hours – " (116)

That is partly because Daisy has changed since their first love, for she was hurt by love and escaped to a marriage that would give her safety; but the more important reason is that Gatsby's dream is polarized now. Therefore, he is left no choice but to go back to the moment when the materialistic and the transcendental could harmonize with each other. And he believes it is possible.

> "Can't repeat the past?" he cried incredulously. "Why of course you can!" (116)

16) Fitzgerald, *Letters* 341.

Gatsby longs to go back to the past, but ironically it is the past that destroys him. He comes along the long and winding road to get to the moment again, but it was the wrong road eventually. At the Plaza Hotel scene, Gatsby collapses too easily from Tom's attack on his job. It suggests that it is futile to disregard the change of reality and transcend the present. We are continually defined by our past, and it continually drags us. Hence, "we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (189). And the valley of ashes cannot be returned to the green island that flowered to the eyes of the Dutch sailors. America has walked a long way along most of all Benjamin Franklin's ideal of America. Now the ideal has petrified and turned to ashes in the valley, where Wilson, the "ashen, fantastic figure," works under the presiding Godlike eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. Myrtle, who still retained the vitality, is crushed to death by Daisy who is affiliated with Tom, the embodiment of coarse materialism, and "her thick, dark blood" is mingled with "the dust" of the valley (145). The faded eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are Franklin's whose residue is still in the back of American mind. The eyes appear from almost the start of this fiction and provide it with the base color and tone. What destroyed Gatsby eventually are these eyes, that is, Franklin's ragged ideal. Gatsby continually parodied his model, but he did not know that he was parodying him. That Gatsby never reflects upon the legitimacy of his way of making money is the evidence. As a result, Gatsby has ironically been faithful to Franklin's model of self-made man in the most negative way.

III

Nick assumes Gatsby's realization of his surroundings right before his death. It tells us that the material world, stripped of all the dreams and ideals, looks rather grotesque.

> I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn't believe it would come and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass. A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about ... like that ashen, fantastic figure gliding toward him through the amorphous trees. (169)

This is the valley of ashes stripped of the Dutch sailors' wonder, a grotesque rose stripped of life's "absolute" mystery, and a world of only materiality. Gatsby's dream turns into a nightmare in those circumstances.

> West Egg especially still figures in my more fantastic dreams. I see it as a night scene by El Greco: a hundred houses, at once conventional and grotesque, crouching under a sullen, overhanging sky and a lustreless moon. In the foreground four solemn men in dress suits are walking along the sidewalk with a stretcher on which lies a drunken woman in a white evening dress. Her hand, which dangles over the side, sparkles cold with

> jewels. Gravely the men turn in at a house – the wrong house. But no one knows the woman's name, and no one cares. (185)

In that nightmare, the goddess who has led the "American dream" has gotten drunk, and her followers now take her to the wrong address. Gatsby who has been drunk with his dream, finally arrived at the wrong place. The most tragic is that no one knows the goddess' name or cares. No one, except Nick, cares Gatsby either, who follows the goddess, after he dies. This is the final sentence to the "American dream": no one cares about the true "American dream."

This is Nick's vision of Gatsby's dream, the "American dream," and the history of America: America is at a historical dead end. No one is sure when it will take a right direction. Human beings, however, have to move in some direction insofar as they are alive. Nick has no choice but the direction of the past as did Gatsby, though he told Gatsby that one can't repeat the past.

> That's my middle-west – not the wheat or t he prairies or the lost Swede towns but the thrilling, returning trains of my youth and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow. I am part of that, a little solemn with the feel of those long winters, a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family's name. I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all – Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life. (184)

This is the nostalgia Nick has to fall back on to forget the nightmare. And this nostalgia is the middle class' response to the catastrophe of their long treasured Franklinesque moral ideal. This nostalgia is for the pre-war time when the American middle class was more naïve and pastoral and communal, for the time of discovery of the American continent when the wonderful promises of new life "pandered." Nostalgia is unproductive but there is no other choice for Nick.

We cannot, however, identify Nick's vision with Fitzgerald's. Let alone the sophistication required for readers to separate the author from the narrator, the narrator's deep sentimentalism in the final part of this novel tells us that he is not the author. It is hard to believe that Nick's sentimental reflections belong to the author who has so critically analyzed the "American dream" and the Franklinesque ideal. But is it likely that Fitzgerald has insinuated another vision of his own, different from Nick °›? Perhaps he also felt it difficult to imagine beyond the historical dead end. Therefore, his achievement in *Gatsby* is that of a critical and faithful reporter of the "American nightmare." Nevertheless, that is never a little one. For it is most important to observe the dying things to the end with clear consciousness if we are to go beyond a certain crisis in history.

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